

*“If this be magic, let it be
an art lawful as eating.”*

*An Alchemical Reading of the Living Statue in
The Winter’s Tale*

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Abstract

This paper aims at reading one of the most enigmatic and fascinating Shakespearean objects, the statue of Queen Hermione in the final scene of The Winter’s Tale, in the light of the alchemical contemporary debate over the respective roles of art and nature. Recalling the Egyptian magic and art recorded in Asclepius, a treatise that must have been familiar to Shakespeare’s contemporaries, the so-called ‘statue scene’ might be seen as representative of the Hermetic world-view, according to which man was not only a helper of nature but also a co-creator, actively participating in the action of perfecting the world and able to reproduce the processes by means of which God, the “great Alchemist,” created life. The discussion will also take into consideration the possible reception of the scene by the patron of Shakespeare’s theatre company, King James I, seemingly hostile towards every form of magic, but, at the same time, associated to figures such as Hermes Trismegistus and Solomon.

Keywords: The Winter's Tale; Paulina; statue scene; recreation; alchemy; Hermeticism.